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ABSTRACT

In an analysis of the public relations aspects of the position of administrative assistant as perceived by college and university presidents, questionnaires were mailed to 1102 college and university presidents. A cover letter instructed the presidents to fill out the questionnaire with reference to "a person deemed the administrative assistant on his staff." They were cautioned to respond to the questionnaire in terms of the situations current at their institutions, not ideal situations. Results indicated that the administrative assistant has an active role in the total public relations effort of colleges and universities. Data regarding the personal and professional characteristics of administrative assistants were also analyzed. (EE)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS ASPECTS OF THE POSITION OF ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A paper

presented to the

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of AEJ

by

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PUBLIC RELATIONS ASPECTS OF THE POSITION OF ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by Jim R. Morris

Introduction

The expertise needed to serve as president or executive officer of an institution of higher learning today precludes the selection of an individual who is unskilled, untempered, and untutored for the difficult job before him.

Today's college or university president, besieged by the demands of a restless faculty, an impatient student body, and an often ill-informed public, nevertheless must go about his daily task of being a president to all factions, both on and off campus. Whether at his desk or making a personal appearance at off-campus events, there are certain important responsibilities which must be carried out in the name of his office.

Many times the president cannot successfully meet all demands and attend to the myriad of details that beset him. Consequently, the need arises for a "personal" assistant, a "man-Friday" for the job. The man usually charged with this responsibility is the administrative assistant.

Background and Significance

Bolman[1] and others[2] have lamented the low esteem given administrators by others in the academic community. Bolman declared that a common belief is

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[1] Bolman, Frederick, D. W., "Can we Prepare Better College and University Administrators?" Educational Record, 45 (Summer, 1964), 272-284.

[2] Griffith, Daniel E., Administrative Theory. New York, Appleton-Century, Crofts, Inc., 1959.

that "only students and professors ever really learn anything and that administrators simply grow accustomed to their work." He added, "For a faculty member to declare any personal interest in administration is often a guaranteed way for him to be shunned by his colleagues."[3]

Brickman asserted that college and university presidents have deserted their ranks in increasing numbers because their multifarious duties have left them "with little direct connection with the basic mission of higher education.... In short," he continues, "What appears to be a position of glamour and influence turns out in many cases to be a bore and a man killer."[4]

Campus unrest and student demands for a voice in administrative affairs have added still another burdensome responsibility to the administrative office. Not only are college and university presidents being made the scapegoat for what has fermented on the campus, they are being criticized for their dealing with the current problem. They are assailed from within the outside the academic community for their decision-making, in matters that seeming have no apparent "right answers."

This is the administrative climate in which the position of administrative assistant must either flourish, or perish. Assaying the situation from the viewpoint of the college or university president, one might conclude that the position exists to fulfill a "felt need" of the president. Brickman suggested that "presidential assistants and associates should be appointed to take over many of the variegated and time-consuming duties of the president."[5]

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[3] Op. Cit. 273.

[4] Brickman, William W., "The College Presidency," (editorial) School and Society (November 18, 1961), 387.

[5] Ibid. p. 387.

Horn, in examining administrative organization, alluded to the harmonious relationship of the president with his administrative assistant: "The president does have someone who is his man--no question about it--his administrative assistant."[6] J. C. Matthews, recently retired president of North Texas State University said every president has one person on his administrative staff whom he deems his administrative assistant. "He may or may not bear that title," Matthews said.[7]

That there is a need for a person or persons to relieve the president of many of the burdensome and routine aspects of his office, there can be no doubt. The administrative assistant is a logical choice for this responsibility.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine the public relations aspects of the position of administrative assistant, as perceived by college and university presidents in the United States. A secondary purpose is to determine the extent, if any, of the variations of the professional qualifications held by persons serving as administrative assistants.

Procedure

The final questionnaire for this study was formulated into three parts, only two of which will be considered in this paper. Part I, Role of the Administrative Assistant, contains 48 items and 15 sub-divided into six major parts. Part III, Personal and Professional Data, containes 17 items. Major areas of Part I include (1) Represent the President, six items; (2) Finance and Development, seven items; (3) Liaison and Public Relations, seven items; (4) Program Development,

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[6] Horn, Francis H., "The Dean and the President," Liberal Education, (December, 1964), 473-475.

[7] Personal Interview with J. C. Matthews, President, North Texas State University, Denton, Texas, June 1968.

Decision Making, Policy Implementation, six items; (5) Personnel, seven items; and (6) Administrative Routine, 15 items.

Questionnaires were mailed to 1102 college and university presidents--the entire population. A cover letter instructed the presidents to fill out the instrument with reference to "one person deemed the administrative assistant." They were cautioned to respond to the various items of the questionnaire in terms of the current situation, not what they thought it ought to be ideally.

There were 751 returns, or 68.15 per cent. Of these, there were 347 filled out questionnaires that were used in the final statistical tabulation. There were 389 responses wherein the respondent did not fill out the questionnaire for some reason. Most common explanation was that they did not have an administrative assistant, therefore, were unable to respond. Other presidents stated that they were new on the job and did not feel qualified to answer the questionnaire. Responses varied from this point.

Findings

The 48 forced-choice items that were included in Part I of the questionnaire was an attempt to determine the role of the administrative assistant in higher education, as perceived by college and university presidents. A summary of the findings related to this portion of the instrument is presented in Appendix A.

Responsibilities of the administrative assistant that are public relations oriented have been gleaned from the questionnaire and are presented in Table 1. Judgment of which items were public relations in nature was solely that of the author and was based on knowledge gained from academic preparation and professional work in the field. The author is cognizant that another person, or a panel of experts, might choose an entirely different set of items.

TABLE 1

Public Relations Aspects of the Position of Administrative Assistant

As Perceived by College and University Presidents

	TO WHAT EXTENT DOES THE ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT:	To a Great Extent 1	2	3	4	Not+ At All 5
1.	Represent you at off-campus functions of an official nature?	9%	16%	42%	23%	9%*
2.	Represent you at off-campus functions of a social nature?	5	13	36	29	18
3.	Make speeches in your stead when you are unable to?	3	11	29	30	28
4.	Represent you at faculty meetings?	2	6	19	20	53
5.	Appear before the legislature when you are unable to?	4	4	10	16	66
6.	Appear before private benefactors and benevolent institutions when you are unable to?	6	13	23	27	31
7.	Devote his efforts to fund raising?	10	11	12	27	40
8.	Devote his efforts to obtaining research and developmental funds?	8	13	17	23	38
9.	Extend services of president's office?	31	29	29	8	3
10.	Work with community-area-state leaders?	21	31	30	9	9
11.	Have the major responsibility for public relations?	13	16	19	26	26
12.	Arrange interviews with the press for newsmakers on campus and visiting dignitaries?	12	12	19	23	34
13.	Prepare news releases for the mass media?	10	6	9	17	59
14.	Serve as "campus guide" to visiting dignitaries and patrons?	15	21	30	23	10
15.	Work with the alumni association?	13	15	21	27	25
16.	Act as "buffer" with persons with minor problems or complaints?	31	27	23	13	6
17.	Plan orientation programs for new personnel?	4	9	22	26	39
18.	Interpret "tone" of school to president?	21	24	32	17	7
19.	Serve as "troubleshooter" in special problem situations?	28	29	29	10	5

*Percentages rounded to nearest whole number. Total N 343

+1-to a great extent; 2-to a more than average extent; 3-to an average extent; 4-to a less than average extent; 5-not at all

Responses recorded in Table 1 point to two broad conclusions which can be made: (1) The president identifies himself as the chief public relations person for his institution, and as such, sees himself taking the major responsibility for that effort, and (2) the administrative assistant is definitely involved in a public relations effort but more at the level of "administrivia."

For example, when it comes to appearing before the legislature and private benefactors, or in fund raising, the administrative assistant is involved to a much less than average extent (items 5, 6, 7, 8). The administrative assistant becomes much more involved when it comes to extending services of the president's office (item 9), working with community-area-state leaders (item 10), acting as a buffer for the president (item 16), interpreting "tone" of school to the president (item 18), and serving as troubleshooter (item 19). (Percentages reported in Table 1 are self-explanatory. The presenter will respond in greater detail to inquiries about specific items).

The final section of the questionnaire was concerned with personal and professional data thought to be relevant to the administrative assistant in higher education. There were fourteen items that were analyzed statistically; three items were recorded as open-ended responses; and the final two questionnaire items requested the presidents to list the three most important personal and three most important professional characteristics that led them to select their respective administrative assistants to fill that position. As a preamble to a more detailed presentation of the findings of this portion of the questionnaire, it might be interesting to present a composite profile of the person who fills the position of administrative assistant in higher education today. The composite is based on the most frequently rendered answer, not necessarily the mean response, although in almost all cases the two would be the same.

The administrative assistant is a male between the ages of 41 and 45, who holds a master's degree in education. He has fewer than five years' administrative experience within the institutional setting and fewer than five years' administrative experience outside the institutional setting. Prior to becoming an administrative assistant, a position he was sought for and did not apply for, he was employed at the institution at which he now works, in an administrative capacity. His official title is Assistant to the President and he has held his present position for fewer than five years. He is considered both a professional and a "leg man" by his president, who rewards him with an annual salary in excess of $16,500. He is held in high esteem by his superior who sees his administrative assistant as a college or university president someday. He was chosen for his job because of his personality, his integrity, his ability to get along with people, and his intelligence. Professional characteristics that brought him to the attention of his president were his demonstrated administrative abilities, his professional competence, his academic credentials, and his knowledge of the institution.

A summary of the findings related to personal and professional data concerning the administrative assistant is presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2

1. Present age of your administrative assistant

under 25.....1%	46-50.....15%
25-30.....8%	51-55.....12%
31-35.....17%	56-60.....7%
36-40.....14%	over 60.....6%
41-45.....19%	

2. Sex Male------84% Female.....16%

3. Highest degree held by your administrative assistant

bachelor's.....22%	Ph.D.....20%
master's.....44%	other.....6%
Ed.D.....9%	

4. Area of concentration in highest degree held by administrative assistant

education.....76	law.....17
ed. adm.....31	history.....25
bus. adm.....27	biology.....6
English.....29	economics.....11
journalism.....20	other.....91
	Total N 333

5. How many years' administrative experience has your administrative assistant had within the instructional setting?

none.....11%	11-15 years.....15%
under 5 years.....30%	16-20 years.....7%
5-10 years.....29%	more than 20 years...7%

6. How many years' administrative experience has he had outside the institutional setting?

none.....28%	11-15 years.....11%
under 5 years.....31%	16-20 years.....5%
5-10 years.....20%	more than 20 years.5%

7. Prior to becoming your administrative assistant, was he most recently

a college teacher.....19%	in business-industry.....12%
a college administrator....36%	in the military.....4%
a secondary school supt.....0%	in news profession.....4%
a secondary school prin.....1%	other.....22%
a minister.....2%	

8. If he were a college teacher, how many years' teaching experience has he had?

under 5 years.....32%	16-20 years.....8%
5-10 years.....37%	more than 20 years.....8%
11-15 years.....14%	

9. How long has he been your administrative assistant?

under 5 years	75%	16-20 years	2%
5-10 years	18%	more than 20 years	0%
11-15 years	4%		

10. Was he employed at your institution immediately prior to becoming your administrative assistant?

yes	58%	no	42%

11. Exact title of your administrative assistant

assistant to the president	183	secretary	4
administrative assistant	73	dean of administration	8
vice president for admin	29	academic dean	8
academic vice president	7	other	23
executive assistant	2		

Total N 337

12. Do you consider the administrative assistant a professional, or "leg man," or both?

professional	39	"leg man"	5	both	56

13. Do you have a job description for the position of administrative assistant?

yes	24%	no	76%

14. What is the next position up the promotional ladder for the administrative assistant?

president	57	none	47
vice president	40	none without doctorate	3
dean	18	none determined	54
department head	2	other	17
director of development	6		

Total N 244

15. Did you seek him for the job?

yes	87%	no	13%

16. Did he seek the job of administrative assistant?

yes	29%	no	71%

17. What is his annual salary (12 months)?

under $6,000	0%	$12,000-$13,499	22%
$6,000-$7,499	2%	$13,500-$16,499	9%
$7,500-$8,999	5%	$15,000-$16,499	13%
$9,000-$10,499	11%	over $16,500 (specify) as much as $37,500	
$10,500-$11,999	12%		

Summary and Discussion

What has been presented in the findings portion of this paper should be kept in perspective. It is simply an analysis of the public relations aspects of the position of administrative assistant, as perceived by college and university presidents. One naturally wonders how administrative assistants perceive their respective roles in higher education; or, what the ideal role should be, as perceived by both parties.

Results reported in this study are but a portion of a larger, more comprehensive effort which was concerned with statistical differences among and between private and public, large and small educational institutions, and the internship aspects of the position.

Results show that the administrative assistant has an active role in the total public relations effort; in fact, a great part of his working day is devoted to what are commonly recognized as public relations tasks.

Whether the administrative assistant has the major responsibility (second to the president) for the implementation of a successful public relations program should be a topic for further inquiry. If the responsibility for the public relations effort is spread among several persons, to what extent is each person involved, in which areas?

Appendix A

Role of the Administrative Assistant
As Perceived by College and University Presidents

TO WHAT EXTENT DOES THE ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT:	To a Great Extent 1	2	3	4	Not At All 5
Represent the President					
1. Represent you at off-campus functions of an official nature?	9%	16%	42%	23%	9%
2. Represent you at off-campus functions of a social nature?	5%	13%	36%	29%	18%
3. Make speeches in your stead when you are unable to?	3%	11%	29%	30%	28%
4. Represent you at faculty meetings?	2%	6%	19%	20%	53%
5. Appear before the legislature when you are unable to?	4%	4%	10%	16%	66%
6. Appear before private benefactors and benevolent institutions when you are unable to?	6%	13%	23%	27%	31%
Finance and Development					
7. Take a major part in preparation of the budget?	14%	16%	23%	22%	25%
8. Exercise control over budget expenditures?	7%	10%	17%	25%	43%
9. Work with campus planning and development?	21%	25%	28%	14%	12%
10. Prepare educational specifications for new buildings?	8%	13%	20%	16%	44%
11. Work with salary schedule?	10%	11%	20%	18%	41%
12. Devote his efforts to fund raising?	10%	11%	12%	27%	40%
13. Devote his efforts to obtaining research and developmental funds	8%	13%	17%	23%	38%
Liaison and Public Relations					
14. Extend services of president's office?	31%	29%	29%	8%	3%
15. Work with community-area-state leaders?	21%	31%	30%	9%	9%
16. Have the major responsibility for public relations?	13%	16%	19%	26%	26%

Appendix A continued

TO WHAT EXTENT DOES THE ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT:	To a Great Extent 1	2	3	4	Not+ At All 5
Liaison and Public Relations cont.					
17. Arrange interviews with the press for news makers on campus and visiting dignitaries?	12%	12%	19%	23%	34%
18. Prepare news releases for the mass media?	10%	6%	9%	17%	59%
19. Serve as "campus guide" to visiting dignitaries and patrons?	15%	21%	30%	23%	10%
20. Work with the alumni association?	13%	15%	21%	27%	25%
Program Development, Decision Making, Policy Implementation					
21. Have decision-making power in matters of policy when you are absent from campus?	12%	17%	21%	15%	35%
22. Assist in formulating policy?	14%	26%	35%	18%	8%
23. Make decisions affecting faculty members?	5%	11%	29%	25%	38%
24. Make decisions affecting student activity?	5%	17%	26%	28%	24%
25. Assist in implementing new policy?	15%	33%	34%	12%	6%
26. Serve as "expediter" for school projects and operations?	27%	33%	25%	11%	4%
Personnel					
27. Serve as consultant to department heads?	7%	16%	26%	21%	27%
28. Act as "buffer" with persons with minor problems or complaints?	31%	27%	23%	13%	6%
29. Recruit and hire new personnel?	6%	11%	18%	27%	38%
30. Plan orientation programs for new personnel?	4%	9%	22%	26%	34%
31. Recommend promotions?	4%	6%	16%	22%	53%
32. Work with faculty council?	5%	8%	23%	27%	37%
33. Work with graduate council?	4%	4%	9%	16%	68%
Administrative Routine					
34. Take care of routine correspondence?	26%	18%	31%	15%	10%
35. Serve as secretary to official college board?	16%	4%	4%	4%	72%
36. Work with student personnel and related student affairs?	9%	19%	27%	27%	19%

Appendix A continued

	TO WHAT EXTENT DOES THE ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT:	To a Great Extent 1	2	3	4	Not+ At All 5
	Administrative Routine					
37.	Keep you informed of current legislation and laws affecting your institution?	17%	20%	21%	25%	16%
38.	Make committee assignments?	4%	8%	15%	19%	54%
39.	Meet report deadlines?	24%	26%	29%	11%	11%
40.	Provide relief from administrative detail?	37%	28%	23%	8%	4%
41.	Serve as director of research-federal projects?	15%	10%	9%	13%	53%
42.	Prepare special materials for president's reports?	26%	26%	24%	14%	11%
43.	Prepare agenda for board meetings?	16%	10%	14%	12%	48%
44.	Interpret "tone" of school to president?	21%	24%	32%	17%	7%
45.	Serve as "troubleshooter" in special problem situations?	28%	29%	29%	10%	5%
46.	Answer questionnaires addressed to you?	29%	22%	25%	11%	12%
47.	Supervise the college-university press?	6%	4%	5%	9%	76%
48.	Devote his efforts to securing grant funds?	11%	14%	13%	17%	44%

*Percentages rounded to nearest whole number. Total N 343

+1-to a great extent; 2-to a more than average extent; 3-to an average extent; 4-to a less than average extent; 5-not at all